

DOWNWARD MOBILITY

December 6, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 1:46-56

"My soul magnifies the Lord, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden."
---Luke 1:46,48(RSV)

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The lead item in the Editorial Section of the New York Times this morning began...

"Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, now stand on the verge of what could be one of the most serious and constructive dialogues that Soviet and American leaders have had in many years..."

How appropriate, in Advent, that the whole world is hushed, in anticipation, hopeful, waiting...

So let us be hopeful, and let us hear the promise of Isaiah; that a day is coming when...

"they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

Let us join brothers and sisters all over their world - praying for peace.

Lord God, you are the source of our hope. When angels sang their Glorias at the birth of your son, they sang about peace on earth. So we pray for peace. We pray for President Ronald Reagan as he prepares to represent us in summit negotiations this week. Give him courage and patience and strength. We pray for Premier Mikhail Gorbachev - as he represents the Soviet people. God of people - be in the midst of it all - renewing strength, causing hope to soar, urging men and women to the difficult but blessed tasks of peacemaking - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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I have discovered that there is nothing so guaranteed to get under the skin of middle-class American Presbyterians as the suggestion that God is partial to the poor. The preacher who wishes to enjoy a peaceful Advent is therefore advised to tiptoe carefully around one of the classic texts of the season - the Magnificat of Mary. "It's not a lullaby," William Willimon quips. "The little pregnant girl looks out across the Judean hills bathed in winter twilight and sings. She thinks she hears kingdoms fall and the earth rock beneath her feet. She feels the child move within her as she hums a little tune of liberation."

The Magnificat - **"My soul magnifies the Lord,"...**

Our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic tradition used to have a decided advantage over us, by being able to keep it in Latin. That way you can read and even enjoy hearing what Mary says without understanding it. We Protestants had the onerous duty of hearing it in plain English...

"he has scattered the proud...he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

I am told that the followers of Martin Luther, when they translated the Latin Mass into German so the people could understand, left one portion in Latin - the Magnificat. The German princes who were so helpful to Luther in his struggle with Rome, were properly nervous about the "mighty being pulled from their thrones" and the low life types being exalted.

It's no wonder the preacher wants to tiptoe around that on an Advent Sunday morning. There are places in the world where it is illegal, subversive activity, to read gentle Mary's song in public. And, of course, there are many places in the world where the words of the Magnificat sound very much like a call to social, economic and, if all else fails, military revolution.

If you were a Central American peasant, barely subsisting on land owned by a wealthy family now living in Miami Beach, and if your husband or brother had been executed by a para-military group and your parish priest told you one day about a place in the Bible where the mighty are pulled down and the poor exalted - you might find that very interesting. The least we - who are relatively wealthy - must do is understand how that sounds when the circumstances are radically different from our own.

What a story it is! A young Galilean peasant girl is paying a visit on her elderly cousin. The teenager, perhaps only 14 years old, is pregnant. She is not an important person. Engagement to a tradesman, a carpenter, had been a ray of hope. But that was in danger now. Her condition would soon be evident to her husband to be. And then there was that strange dream, an angel telling her that the baby within her would be great, and that she should call his name Jesus.

So young Mary hurries off to see an older and trusted relative, an understanding grandmother figure. She is a frightened and bewildered teenager with nowhere else to turn. And Luke, with poignancy and

tenderness gathers up the power of this meeting by telling us that the child in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy when Mary arrives, and adds an intriguing detail that Mary remains there three months.

We'd like to spiritualize it, make it into a metaphor - or at least keep it in Latin, but Luke won't allow us to do that. Luke, alone among the Gospel writers, sees that with the birth of this baby God has done something new and that things are now fundamentally different for all God's creatures.

The purpose of the whole enterprise, Luke and Mary remind us, is the salvation of human life, not simply the organization of a new religion. The purpose is that human life should be saved - from everything that inhibits and demeans and destroys it. That includes physical illness, ignorance. It includes demeaning poverty and oppression. Salvation, in Luke and in Mary's Magnificat, means the overcoming of death and the freeing of human life to be lived in glorious peace and fullness.

Luke and Mary understand that to participate in that, you have to know how poor you are. If you already have it all, think you have it all, or are convinced that the purpose of your life is getting it all, what need do you have for this baby?

That's what is behind the Biblical preference for the poor and the consistent harsh treatment of the rich. It is not that the Bible is actually Marxist. It's not that Jesus was a socialist. He wasn't. Nor was he a supply-side conservative. In fact someone has suggested that American Christianity needs to develop a theology of responsible stewardship - instead of alternating between anger at those who resent our wealth and guilt over having it... Surely "sell all you have and give to the poor" is not the only thing Jesus ever said to a rich person. And it is not that the Bible regards wealth and power as evil and poverty and weakness as good. Poverty is no virtue. Poverty means illiteracy and disease and infant mortality, hopelessness in Cabrini Green - in the Hollows of West Virginia. In what sense then is the Bible partial to the poor? What does it mean? It's just that wealthy and powerful people have a way of thinking they have everything they need or at least know what they need and how to get it. Biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown is helpful when he observes that the New Testament poor are "those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence upon God: the lowly, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans. The opposite of the 'Anawim,' (poor ones) are not simply the rich, but the proud and self sufficient who showed no need of God or of his help." [The Birth of the Messiah, Raymond E. Brown, p. 351]

That is the idea that shows up throughout the Bible, not only in Luke, but in Psalms and in much of the prophetic literature.

The real problem in the Bible, is not flat-out, flagrant sin. The Bible confronts and heals the overt sinner, the robbers and adulterers, and cheaters. The real problems are the people who don't think they have any problems, or needs. To address that, to give salvation - to those people, God comes into the world in a particular way, designed to show them and us - that our salvation begins at a point radically different from striving.

reaching, climbing. It begins with the confession of need and the humility of the recipient of a great gift.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Jesuit theologian, came up with a helpful description of that basic Christian posture. He called it "Downward Mobility." He wrote,

"God not only chose an insignificant people,... not only chooses a humble girl in an unknown town in Galilee... God also chose to manifest the fullness of divine love in a man whose life led to a humiliating death outside the walls of the city." [The Selfless Way of Christ, Sojourners, 6/14/81]

Obviously there is a very basic tension here with the value system of our culture. We're interested in "upward mobility." It is what we will make significant sacrifices for. It is almost the bottom-line hope of parents - that their children's "upward mobility" will result in the kids doing even better than Mom and Dad. My generation, children of the depression, is obsessed with making it. We chuckle about the fact that our children graduate from college and then sit down and try to figure out the meaning of life. We graduated from college one day, and reported to work the next morning. After the moral sensitivity and subsequent protests of the Sixties and Seventies, my generation, the people now in charge, are pleased to see the return of our obsession. Professors of Ethics at the Seminary lament the proliferation of M.B.A.s, and BMWs as value symbols instead of the alphabet soup of the Sixties - SDS and ADA and NAACP. Someone may be lamenting the fact that on college campuses all over the nation there are more business and economic majors than ever and fewer philosophy and literature majors. But check the faces of most fifty-year-olds, particularly those in three piece suits, and you'll probably notice them smiling discreetly. We are interested in upward, not downward, mobility.

Again, Nouwen:

"Our whole way of living is structured around climbing the ladder of success and making it to the top. Our very sense of vitality is dependent upon being part of the upward pull and the joy provided by the rewards given on the way up."

We know about that, don't we? We know our obsession with power, our need to be the biggest and the best, as the moral and political crisis of this age. We are in a spiritual crisis because in recent months Americans have had to come to terms with the relativity of their power and wealth within a world economy. It has not been easy on us. And it is almost a cliché now to characterize American culture as incurably acquisitive, grasping, selfish and narcissistic.

I have a growing hunch, however, that we - about whom those critiques and clichés are written - know better. I have a growing conviction that the real moral cutting edge today is with the people who know better than anyone else that success is not salvation, namely the successful. I have a hunch that the powerful know better than anyone, that there is no such thing in this world as "saving power": not economic power, not political

power, not even military power. We know, I believe, that the things we want and crave and are willing to give our lives for, are not going to produce what we need and what, underneath it all, beneath the upwardly mobile striving, we want most of all.

A friend of mine who teaches theology says that, to be middle age in our culture is to finally arrive and discover that you are irrelevant: to work very hard for 35 years, climb the ladder and to be told at the age of 59 that you are no longer needed. [Walter Baumann, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio]

The social scientists don't have to scold us. We know that the deepest hunger in us is not fed by the material rewards of the affluent society. We know about being "turned away hungry and empty," in Mary's words.

And so Advent and gentle Mary's Magnificat and the incredible assertion that God, long ago, committed himself to "downward mobility." God, we believe, in a long ago past, stooped low, to walk in history with a particular people, to share their lives, to participate in their defeats and to celebrate their victories. Unlike the deities of every other religion in history, God, we believe, left the courts of heaven and came down and became vulnerable.

That is what this Christmas business is about. It is what Mary was singing about - a downwardly mobile God, a vulnerable God, a God who shows up in the weakness and humility of a new born child.

We know the enormous power of that at Christmas. In the midst of wealth and power and bright lights and a year-end celebration of affluence, we keep bumping into symbols of a very different set of values... mangers, cow stalls, a humble teenage mother, shepherds, a new born infant.

What we must not miss is the invitation to downward mobility. So hear Mary's song. Let this frightened Galilean peasant teach you something this year.

Let her teach you, for instance, to celebrate the birth of her son this year by loosening your grip, slowing your pace, and re-examining your obsession to try to do far too much in the next three weeks. Let her teach you that this obsession of ours with getting ahead, succeeding, upward mobility, is a very poor substitute for the wholeness God is willing to give as a gift.

You are invited in Advent to a quiet revolution. You are invited to find meaning, joy, peace, and wholeness in a surprising new place, not a classroom, or courtroom, operating room or board room, but in a humble cow stall back of the Inn. You are invited to a new direction, following a star which shines over a very modest place called Bethlehem. You are invited to find a whole new set of realities, placed into human history by Mary's child - peace, forgiveness, love, compassion, tenderness. You are invited to ponder, celebrate, embrace, that downward mobility which may be the beginning of your salvation. Amen.